

# Greek a Dead Language? Not if Expatriates of That Land Can Be Believed



A Row of Greek Stores on Madison Street.

**Members of New York's Colony of Greeks Desire to Pass Their Language on Intact to Future Generations, and Spare Neither Energy Nor Money with That End in View—Exploitation of Lads of That Race by Bootblack Padrones.**

"ALL the world's queer but me and thee, and thou art a little queer."

In the reputed words of the Quaker philosopher, addressed to his wife, that is the feeling of a large proportion of America toward the peasant stranger from other lands who has straggled inside the gate. And of all these strangers none are queerer than those who come from the shores of the Mediterranean. "The new immigration," they are called, and many sins of omission are charged against them. One of the "sins" is illiteracy. At them is levelled the literacy test which the ardent restrictionist has ardently striven to have applied to immigrants.

If one should ask an American if he would fight for a language, place its preservation on a level with that of the state and the church, the idea would seem so strange to him that he probably would answer, "Why, no; of course not. Who would?" The New Yorker who knows the polyglot population of his city well, however, would answer, "The Greeks would." What, this group of immigrants from the illiterate region of the Mediterranean?

As an evidence of the truthfulness of his assertion he could point to the fact that the Greek colony of New York is a couple of weeks ago dedicated in The Bronx a boarding school established to preserve among the Greek children the classical language of the early inhabitants of the rugged peninsula from which their fathers came. It is a so-called dead language which they revere and which they wish to pass on to their children. For this purpose the Greeks, comparatively few of whom have been in this country more than a decade, contributed a dollar here, a couple of dollars there, until the fund reached a sufficient sum to purchase the stone fort-like Hebrew Orphan Asylum building, near Third avenue and 163d street. They are now fitting it up to accommodate two hundred children, who will come from the different colonies in the country. Here they will study Greek, as well as English and other branches of learning, the chief motive for the school, however, being the preservation of the tongue of their famous forebears.

## FOUGHT FOR THEIR LANGUAGE.

But would they really fight for their language? The story is told of a riot in the streets of Athens over the translation of the New Testament from the old Greek into the modern idiom. Such trifling with the sacred institutions of the country was too much for the people to accept peacefully, and they rose in their might to do away with the inquiry. No one struggles in a physical sense in America over a revision of the Testament which is intended to replace the English of Shakespeare and Milton with that of modern writers. Our dictionary is still growing. That of classical Greek stopped long ago.

Some day, when time hangs heavily on your hands, journey to the Park Row entrance to the Brooklyn Bridge. Pick your way along Park Row toward Chatham Square until you come to the car track on which one of New York's ancient institutions, the horse car, passes through the ornate arch of the new municipal office building. Turn your back upon this gray, towering, fortress-like pile of stone and follow the car track until you come to the South Ferry branch of the elevated road, in Pearl street. On the way to this lower fringe of the East Side, this borderland between business and home life, you pass one or two old brick houses with doorways of a design that is reminiscent of the days when well-to-do inhabitants of the little old city dwelt in this region.

## A PORTAL FOR LITERATURE.

As you approach Pearl street and look across under the elevated track you see the plate glass windows of a small store which projects forward like the first story of a miniature Platon Building, which it is, for it occupies the acute angle formed by the intersection of Madison street with Roosevelt street. Gay lithographs in primitive colors glare forth from the windows. Running along the fringe of the awning is a group of words in strange characters which you recognize to be Greek.

You discover in due course that this is a Greek book store—the Atlas Book Store. You suddenly remember that Atlas was an old Greek deity. You step inside. Recalling that American book stores, notwithstanding the literacy of Americans, are comparatively few, you ask yourself how so illiterate a people as the Greeks are supposed to be, according to the re-

strictionists and the Ellis Island figures, should be able to support a book store. If by good fortune you are accompanied by a lover of the Greek tongue who has lived in Greece and understands the people of that small, rock ribbed country you will find yourself at the beginning of a little journey into an unknown land which will give you a new impression of a people whom you may have always thought of as bootblacks, keepers of candy stores and vendors of flowers.

The proprietor, a smooth shaven man of not above thirty years, invites you to sit down around his desk and have a cup of coffee. Imagine an American store-keeper inviting any one to do this in business hours! You sit down, as you have been requested to do, and glance around at the shelves of books, taking pains now and then to study the strong lines of the forceful young man opposite you. You make up your mind as he talks about Greek books, how they are published and his methods of procuring them that he is a man of energy, acumen and character. The keeper of the Greek corner book store illustrates his remarks with paper bound volumes which he has brought to him while you sit waiting for the coffee. They have covers in the primary colors, which give them a crude appearance to the American eye and suggest the dime novel. The works of fiction, however, you are informed, are not so cheap a type, but compare with the 25-cent paper covered American novel in quality.

"What is the price of such a book?" lifting one up.

"From \$1.25 to \$1.50, according to size," is the reply.

Can it be possible that Greek bootblacks are willing to pay as much as that for a story bound only in paper? You open the book. Sixteen hundred pages! A novel sixteen hundred pages long? Yes.

am able in that way to buy perhaps a thousand complete copies of a given book, all that is left of the edition, at a moderate price and sell them at about 10 cents a hundred pages."

A glance at his catalogue, which contains about thirty pages, shows that this is about the rate at which his books are



Two Greek Girls.



A Greek Family in the Downtown Colony.

And here is another of 969 pages and a third of 1,114. "Verily here," you exclaim mentally in the modified language of the preacher, "of making of books there is no end." De Morgan, Thackeray and the three-volume novel are beaten to a standstill. You imagine the bootblack, or perhaps it is the padrone himself, or the candy man, sitting up night after night, the day's toil over, like the servant in "Rudder Grange," burying the trials and tribulations of life in an ocean of words recounting the vicissitudes of heroes and heroines, their adventures in wars, with brigands and with rivals in love. Who said the Greeks were illiterate?

"There is a market for Greek books in this country to the amount of about \$200 a day," says the book dealer. "A good deal of it is mail order business. We get orders from all over the country. I get my books chiefly from Greece. The publishers there issue the books in sixteen page sections, which they sell separately. After they have finished issuing the sections and the book is finished I buy up those left over and have them bound together with my imprint on the cover. I

can't be sure of the quality of the Greek books, but I can be sure of the quality of the English astonishingly good for one who had been in this country only a few years, "think everything should be written in the classical style of Greek. It is cold and looks backward toward the past. It does not speak the feelings of the people. Instead of teaching children to write the old classical Greek, they should be taught to express themselves in modern Greek, which is the spoken language, the language which springs from the heart. Let them write in this from sixteen until they are twenty-two.

"Our leading writers," said he in a quality of English astonishingly good for one who had been in this country only a few years, "think everything should be written in the classical style of Greek. It is cold and looks backward toward the past. It does not speak the feelings of the people. Instead of teaching children to write the old classical Greek, they should be taught to express themselves in modern Greek, which is the spoken language, the language which springs from the heart. Let them write in this from sixteen until they are twenty-two.

and then take up the old Greek. By the time they are forty they will be able to write in the classical style, and it will fit their feelings at that age. The modern Greek is for the expression of the feelings of the young, the classical for those of the older man. Instead of always looking backward, they would be looking forward also. I once wrote a book in which I wished to place a paragraph regarding one's attitude toward the future. I could not write it, because there were no words in the old Greek to express my feelings, what I wished to convey."

By this time you have reached the brown mud at the bottom of your demitasse, and you rise to go, having found it "good to be there." You continue along Madison street to the next corner, where it is crossed by James, and see numerous signs in Greek characters. If you have no knowledge of Greek you will feel like a certain well known Arctic explorer who visited Russia to buy supplies for his expedition. He could not read the Russian characters, so his railroad journey with a face toward Archangel was an experience of a nature to try the feelings of any one less perfect than an angel of any



Type of Greek Child



A Greek Bootblack Padrone.



Greek Children.



Some of the Children Who Will Attend the New Greek School.



The Greek Book Store and Its Proprietors.

class. He was in the helpless predicament of a pleasant immigrant to America, for he could not read the signs on the stations, but was forced to rely upon the word of the train guard. Finally, set down at the right station, he produced the slip on which was written in Russian characters the name and address of the man he wished to see, and showed it to a policeman. The official could not read. He could not speak Russian!

The signs on the windows may say which is the coffee house, which the barber shop, which the grocery store, but to you they are all "Greek." You cannot tell which is which without standing in front of each place and looking in. This is the centre of the oldest Greek colony in New York City. In the neighborhood of this street intersection are more than half a dozen coffee houses and restaurants owned and frequented by Greeks. You note the cleanliness of the street, a cleanliness that astonishes you, it is in such marked contrast with streets in the Italian and Jewish quarters only a few rods away.

Walking with your companion along Madison street, you glance in at the coffee houses, the social centres of the colony. Each is alike in the character of its tables. All are round. All the houses are alike in having pictures on the wall of a type which you could find in no other colony. They are scenes of Greek life and history, and perhaps, in the cases of the different cafes, of scenes which would be of particular interest to the frequenters. Each coffee house represents a different town in the old country, the owner and his patrons coming from the same community. At the rear of this one is a row of Turkish nargilles, but they are not seen in many places. In all, however, are to be found numerous copies of Greek newspapers. No American loves his newspaper more than does the Greek. It has been asserted that there are more different newspapers published in Athens than in New York City. In this city there are two Greek newspapers, one of which is so prosperous that it has linotype machines

and modern equipment for publishing a daily paper.

Among those into which you look is the Bosphorus. In the little circle sitting around a table near the window is a man with an olive complexion, a slender mustache, a thin thatch of silky brown hair and small eyes, with a kindly twinkle in them. He rises and says to your companion, the professor, for such on this particular jaunt he chances to be:

"Is this Mr. —?" mentioning him by name.

Receiving an affirmative response he says that he met the professor in Boston four years ago and invites you to sit down and have some coffee with him.

He is one of the men of Central and Southeastern Europe who have the faculty for picking up languages. His list includes Greek, Turkish, Arabic, Italian, Spanish, French and English, the last spoken almost as readily as the American speaks it and with almost no accent. He translates a fairy tale in a curious Greek dialect of the professor, and then you bethink yourself of a luncheon in a neighboring Greek restaurant.

A few doors away is the Patras. It is clean and neat appearing in its dress of white paint, and in you go, the professor picking out the meal from the menu, which is in Greek. The repast is a typical Greek one, and concludes with a pastry dessert which is unlike anything you would find anywhere else. It is guaranteed not to affect you in the discomforting way the crust of the pies "that mother used to make" would do. It seems to be made up of thinly rolled layers, interlined with syrups of different flavors. "The layers are as thin as leaves," you remark, and then learn that you have hit the nail on the head, for its name, being interpreted, means "leaves." On the wall is a photograph of a wrestler wearing a double row of medals on his expansive chest. This person is the Greek wrestler who won honors at the first Olympic games, which were held in Greece. Wrestling and running are the forms of ath-

letics in which the Greeks excel, and there is a Greek athletic club in New York. One of the things which has seemed curious to you is the absence of children from the streets. Few are to be seen in this neighborhood. It is accounted for by the fact that there are comparatively few Greek families in America. It is said that more than 90 per cent of those here are either single men, or men who have left their families at home. This is the social problem which the Greeks present in the United States. There is, perhaps, no racial group, with the exception of the Chinese and Turks, represented in this country which relatively has brought so few of its women and children with it. This may be due in part to the feeling of obligation among young men to provide dowries for their sisters before they themselves marry, or the practice of indenture of Greek youths by their parents to padrones in this country for a term of years in order to provide for the marriageable daughters.

Although it is a Saturday afternoon, you see only one group of boys in the street. Inquiring if any of them are Greeks, the leaders obligingly come forward and offer to find one for you. They are so determined to supply the demand that a youngster is produced in short order. Direct interrogation reveals the fact that

he was never nearer to Greece than the toe of the boot of Italy. A Greek family, however, is at last discovered, its members ranging from the grandmother to the grandchild.

You find several children later, however, when you visit the new school in the Bronx. They have come from several different places outside of New York to study in the Greek school. One girl has the curious combination of golden hair, pink cheeks and seal brown eyes. She recalls to your mind the theory which has been advanced that the Greeks of the great classical days was a land dominated by the blond type.

The Greek is one of the newer problems in our alien population. The North American Civic League spent several months investigating him throughout the entire State of New York. In the course of the first decade of the twentieth century more than 200,000 left their little mountain-girt farming districts and towns and landed on these shores, multiplying the Greek population here by ten. Among the first to come were the hardy and ambitious young men from the neighborhood of Sparta and Tripolis. Then the floodgates opened and the stream was swelled by tributary currents from the Peloponnese, Attica, Thessaly, Euboea, Macedonia and the islands of the archipelago. The queer door of America looked very tempting to the energetic Greeks of Macedonia when it fell into the hands of Turkey, and particularly following the rise to power of the Young Turk party. The compulsory military service required by the Porte was an influence.

The small, seedless grape called the Greek currant is credited with being responsible for starting the flow. For nearly half a century this grape was the chief article of export and almost the sole source of ready money in the agricultural communities. The market was created through the destruction of the vineyards of France by an American plant louse fifty years ago. The Greek farmers con-

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